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A
Dissertation on Anasarca

By

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By this term is meant a puternatural collection of watery fluids in the cellular spaces of the body.

Pathology. Much contrariety of opinion has always existed in regard to the pathology of dropsy. It is now however generally allowed to arise from a derangement of that balance which in a natural state subsists between the powers of secretion & absorption.

In persons of health there is always a watery fluid poured out or exhaled in vapour into the various cavities of the body and interstices of the cellular membrane and taken up again by the absorbents:—hence it follows that dropsical effusions may depend either on excess of exhalation or a diminution in the powers of absorption.

But still the question occurs which of these two functions is in fault?

From a view of the general condition of the system—the various circumstances connected with dropsy—and the nature of the principal remedies suited to its cure—and from the support given by

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some of the best practitioners, it is right to presume that there is in this disease very generally excessive action of the exhalents.

This however is a point of life importance since whether the absorbents or exhalents be in fault it is admitted on all hands that our remedies are to be directed to the enervation of the action of the absorbents.

Symptoms. Anasarca generally appears first with a swelling of the lower extremities towards evening which disappears for a time in the morning. The swelling at first is always elastic and readily receives the pressure of the finger, which leaves an indentation for sometime after the pressure is removed, the skin becoming much more flaccid than natural at these points of pressure. By degrees the swelling proceeds upwards, occupying the thighs and trunk, and at length even the face and eyelids become bloated. As the disease progresses respiration becomes difficult and uneasy from effusion in the cellular membrane of the lungs; the bowels become constipated

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-pates; the urine scanty and high-coloured; the skin hot and dry; the pulse febrile, small and corded, together with an almost insupportable thirst. After this the disease advances with great rapidity: torpor and a heavy drowsiness with a slow and indistinct fever supervene. The distention from the accumulation of the watery fluid is now so great that it forces its way through the skin itself and through the pores of the cuticle; or if too gross to pass by these excretory vesicles or blisters are formed which burst and sometimes terminate in gangrene and mortification; and the patient is finally exhausted to death.

causes. The same causes which produce the other forms of dropsy also produce anasarca; which are most generally some preexisting disease, by which the animal economy has suffered much derangement; as intermittent fever, jaundice, diarrhoea, dysentery, gout, rheumatism, asthma, pulmonary consumption, exanthematous affections &c. obstructions

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and certain depraved conditions of the abdominal and
thoracic viscera; and sometimes more debility without
any other previous disorder of the system than
a certain condition called the hydropic diathesis.

Treatment. Regarding of the theory that was so
generally adopted by the European writers, which
made dropsy to consist essentially in laxity of the
system, and which led necessarily to the destructive
practice of treating the disease indiscriminately
with stimulants and tonics; it is perhaps enough
for the present purpose to enter upon that treatment
which now obtains with the best practitioners.

Anasarca may be associated either with an
excited or debilitated state of the system. But it is
in the first character that the disease is most
commonly met with; being indeed almost in-
variably attended by a febrile condition of the
arterial system and other inflammatory symptoms.

Nevertheless anasarca is sometimes a disease
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general system, or from disease of some of the great viscera, as the liver, spleen, pancreas, stomach &c.

Yet there is much obscurity as respects the exact condition of the body in which this disposition of the disease occurs, and much of the uncertainty in our remedies arises from confounding these different states of the system.

By a late writer on the subject of dropsy* the qualities of the urine are considered as indicative of the real state of the system. He states that in dropsies of high excitement the urine always coagulates by heat or nitric acid; that when the disease is connected with visceral unsoundness, as indurations of the liver, spleen &c. the urine is scanty and high coloured, loaded with a red latitious sediment, and deposits nothing by heat; and that in dropsies of very feeble action the urine is very scanty and pale, does not coagulate by heat, and deposits no sediment whatever. These remarks relative to the urine deserve attention, yet

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the future experience shall establish the contrary; it will not be right to give up the pulse for the appearance of the oedema as an index to the state of the system. The indications to be answered in the treatment of anasarca, in common with all other dropsies, whatever be the state of the system; are, first to evacuate the fluids already effused; and secondly to prevent the reaccumulation of it.

As before observed anasarca is most generally attended by an excited state of the system; and the treatment of it under this character shall be first considered. And here the first indication is to be met by the directly evacuant remedies.

Resection. This the most powerful of the antiphlogistic agents will be found decidedly beneficial when examined by sound discussion and a proper regard to the condition of the system. The pulse in the early stage of this form of anasarca is invariably hard, tense and corded;

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and the blood when drawn constantly shows signs of a high degree of inflammation; there is a hot dry skin; the tongue and fauces parched; great thirst &c. As long as such a condition of the system continues the lancet is indicated; and it should be repeated.

"A correct guide to the use of the lancet" says the writer above quoted "may be found in the firmness, copiousness, and early appearance of coagulums in the urine; its limits, in the improvement of that discharge, the state of the blood, and the relief of the other symptoms."

Emetics. It was formerly the practice to prescribe these remedies in dropsy under the idea of their great power in promoting absorption; and certainly they are not destitute of this power; but they have lost their former ground, and are now rarely given except to relieve a loaded and oppressed stomach.

Purgatives. These are remedies of the highest im-

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-portance in the treatment of this disease; not less from
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 than their power in reducing febrile excitement
 and removing that obstinate constipated state of
 the bowels incident to the commencement of dropsy.
 By the earlier writers the most drastic articles were
 prepared for this purpose, but these are mischievous
 in the febrile stage of dropsy, increasing the heat
 and fever. It is much better in this stage of the
 disease to resort to a milder class of purgatives and
 particularly to the tartaric preparations. A com-
 -bination of supertartaric of potash and jalap con-
 -stitutes an invaluable purgative under these circum-
 -stances. These articles are generally prescribed in
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 grs. of the latter, to be repeated so often as to keep
 up an almost unceasing discharge from the
 bowels. Exhibited in this way this combination is
 alleged sometimes to remove the utmost degree
 of intumescence in the course of two or three days.

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It certainly is one of the best purgatives that we can employ.

Diuretics. But notwithstanding the general utility of the above practices it does sometimes fail, and we are compelled to resort to diuretics or that class of remedies which act more immediately on the absorbent system. In prescribing these remedies however we are still to recollect that we are treating the inflammatory form of the disease, and therefore should have recourse to the milder class.

In this state of the disease the best of all the diuretics is the super-saturated of potash. Long used and distinguished for its efficacy, its reputation is now established by general experience. There are two modes of exhibiting this medicine to which it is necessary to attend:—When dissolved in a large quantity of water it acts merely as a diuretic; whereas the same dose given in a small quantity of water or in the shape of an electuary produces a combined operation on the kidneys and bowels;

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Much has been said of the powers of the alkalis in dropsy - of the two fixed alkalis potash seems always to have had the preference. By the older practitioners the ashes of a variety of vegetables were employed. Being efficacious however only from the alkali which they contain they have been supplanted by the common carbonate of potash.

The cases of dropsy in which the potash proves most beneficial are probably those connected with great deprivation of the powers of digestion; and such are most generally met with among drunkards; and it is not very unusual under such circumstances to find a considerable evolution of acid in the stomach, producing, or associated with, some very distressing affections.

By combining the alkali with some one of the bitter tonics, as gentian, columbo, or any article of

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the kind (a practice which originated with Sir
Ist. Bringle) its powers are very much augmented,
tending to remove the gastric disorder, while its
diuretic property is said to be increased.

The alkalies however are inferior to the neutral
salts: of these the nitrate of potash is eminently
suited to dropsies of high action. This is inferior
to some others of the class as a diuretic; but it has
a powerful influence over the arterial system;
reducing the inflammatory symptoms. The
objection to it is, that when prescribed in adequate
doses to make a strong impression, it excites nau-
-sea and we are obliged to lay it aside.

The dulcified spirit of nitre is a medicine far less
offensive and may be employed as a substitute
for the above; it is however much inferior to it
and is especially suited to children. But when
freely given it operates actively on the kidneys,
and produces large discharges of urine; but to
obtain this effect it must be liberally prescribed;

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not less than from 3j to 3i several times in the 24 hours; at least, it should be thus largely given in dropsy.

The sal diureticus (or acetate of potash) was once a famous diuretic; but its powers in this respect have been greatly overrated.

Parsley is also a remedy of considerable importance. It is stated to have cured a case of ascites where the patient had been twice tapped without effect; and in other instances likewise it has proved highly beneficial. It is generally prescribed in strong decoction of the root.

As I have detailed them such are the principal remedies generally used in inflammatory dropsy.

But, as before remarked, anasarca may be associated with a feeble action, either originally, or may acquire this character in its progress, or by improper treatment, and here of course the treatment must differ from that above detailed.

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But purgatives are remedies of the highest importance; and how it is proper to recur to the drastics. The obstinate constipation and extreme torpor of the alimentary canal demand for their removal the most powerful cathartics, as combinations of calomel and gamboge, colocynth, scammony, elaterium &c.

It is also in this description of the disease in which a set of diuretics, inadmissible in the inflammatory stage of the complaint, is found efficacious.

Digitalis is an article of very valuable powers in this character of dyspepsia. From the known action of this medicine this would seem extraordinary, yet the fact is indisputable, that it is on a system exhausted and enfeebled that digitalis displays its best effects. As long as there is much activity of the pulse, or much general strength, it will not only be unserviceable, but often productive of the

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most mischievous consequences. But where the pulse is feeble, the countenance pale and the skin cold, it will hardly fail to prove beneficial. In regard to the best mode of prescribing this remedy considerable difference of opinion has existed. By some an infusion is preferred while others prefer the tincture or substance. The best and safest ^{mode} is to prescribe it in substance.

The tobacco, a remedy closely allied to digitalis, was not long ago introduced in the treatment of dropsy, and enjoyed for a while popularity. It is however a very disagreeable remedy; equivocal in its operation, and sometimes hazardous; and therefore should not be prescribed unless the other remedies of known efficacy prove unavailing.

The squill is a remedy of the most unequivocal utility in all the forms of dropsy; but it is a highly stimulant medicine, and hence must be prescribed with discrimination and judgment. The best mode of giving it is in union with

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Cantharides are sometimes prescribed with very good effect, in dropsy connected with a depraved and cachectic condition of the system: nor are we to fear their distrobing the urinary organs: when given in the full forms of dropsy and in liberal doses.

The spirit of turpentine is also prescribed in ascites dropsy, and being a powerful stimulant and producing a strong determination to the urinary organs it is not altogether without promise in such cases.

The *polygala senega*, has been much extolled as a remedy in dropsy, but its reputation has suffered from a want of discrimination in its employment. In cases of universal dropsy dependent on a very enfeebled absorption and which are connected with a general cachectic state of the system, it would seem best suited. And in some cases its efficacy is greatly

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The *colochicum autumnale* is an exceedingly active and stimulating diuretic, and enjoys a high reputation in these cases of dropsy on the Continent of Europe; tho. it does not stand very high with the American or British practitioners. It is prescribed in the form of extract or vinous tincture.

The *pyrola umbellata* is another diuretic which is getting into regular practice, and from the evidence in its favour deserves the attention of practitioners. It is actively diuretic and at the same time proves tonic to the stomach.

The *altaciac* have been much employed in atonic dropsy; of these the *altum salivum* or common gale =
= lie is the most efficacious. It is a highly stimu =
= lating diuretic and would seem best adapted to dropsy arising from habits of drunkenness and connected with debility of the stomach.

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employed in the treatment of dropsy. They once indeed constituted the favourite practice in the disease but eventually lost their reputation. They are however again revived and they would seem more particularly suited to those dropsies which have their origin in intermittent fever and which are kept up by visceral congestions; marked by atony, a small tense corded pulse, cold extremities, dry skin and many other symptoms of feeble action on the surface of the body.

Diaphoresis may be produced either by external or internal means. The vapour bath is frequently a very efficacious mode of exciting the action of the skin. However under these circumstances, a combination of calomel, opium and ipecac is chiefly to be relied on. Even by the use of opium alone, given in large doses, cures of this complaint are said to have been accomplished.

This article is however much more to be relied on when used in the shape of Dover's powder,

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which is often found to produce very great benefit.

The *eupatorium perfoliatum* has lately acquired considerable reputation in the treatment of dropsy. It is perhaps best adapted to the disease when generated in miasmatic districts. The disease in such situations often assumes more or less of the intermittent character, and is frequently successfully managed by a combination of tonic and diaphoretic medicines.

The last general remedy to be mentioned in the treatment of anasarca, is mercury. When the disease is produced, or kept up, by obstructions of the viscera mercury becomes indispensable.

Nor is it perhaps less efficacious in dropsy by exciting the action of the absorbents, to which repels much of its power is directed. It is to be recollected however that in weak dropsy connected with a scorbutic or strumous contamination mercury is prejudicial. It is in dropsy where

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there are some tone and soundness of constitution, after reduction of arterial action, in which mercury is most beneficial.

I have now enumerated most of the general means to remove the water in dropsical swellings. But in addition to these it is sometimes necessary to resort to local measures for the same purpose. When the extremities become very painful and much distended with water great relief will be obtained by evacuating, it by means of small punctures with a sharp lancet. It will be necessary however to be very careful and not to puncture too deep or wide since exsufflatory inflammation and gangrene may result.

It not unfrequently happens that we are called on to remedy this last state of things, and when we are it will be found a matter of considerable difficulty. This tendency to gangrene is owing to a want of vitality in the integuments which is occasionally brought on by excessive distentions

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from the effused fluid, prepared to. The treatment in this case is very embarrassing. Blisters, in other instances eminently serviceable in arresting mortification, (and tho they might sometimes here prove beneficial) nevertheless frequently themselves induce the state we wish to remove, and therefore are employed with hazard. Frictions are sometimes usefully resorted to under these circumstances. But the remedy found most beneficial in arresting the progress of this fatal mortification is the flannel roller, introduced in this case by Professor Chapman. It should be applied so as to compress the parts tightly extending above and below the disease. Its *modus operandi* is quite intelligible; there is in the limb at the time a loss of action and temperature; the flannel roller imparts both warmth and vigour to the limb and thus enables it to resist the farther encroachment of this affection.

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In the inflammatory stage the diet should be very low. Even entire abstinence from food is said to have cured dropsy; by lessening arterial action and of course increasing the absorbent function. But in atonic dropsy the system must be supported by a generous plan of living.

Much difference of opinion has existed on the subject of drinks in dropsy. Passing by the false doctrine which led some practitioners to forbid an indulgence in them it is sufficient to say that so far from being prejudicial they are now properly considered as useful auxiliaries in the treatment of dropsy. Common water answers very well; or water acidulated with vegetable acids; Infusion of juniper berries is likewise of great advantage, all to be freely taken. And in old protracted dropsies gin or whiskey and water (weak) make a very useful drink.

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answering the second indication, which is ^{to} prevent a reaccumulation of the serous effusion. To do this it must be our object, to effect a radical change in that condition of the system which predisposes to the disease. If the disease is of a limited character frictions will prove of much advantage - also tightly compressing the whole limb with a bandage. It is also recommended to employ the topical cold baths - We must also resort to exercise and tonic medicines, and of these the most effectual are combinations of the peruvian bark and the calybeate preparations.

If after all these means there still remains a strong and constant disposition to a return of the disease, we should revolutionize the whole system by an attenuated course of mercury; and should there be so much debility as to render the mercury inadmissible the nitric acid may be substituted and with decided advantage.

